

Criminally Good

John Lawrence Reynolds returns to the fold

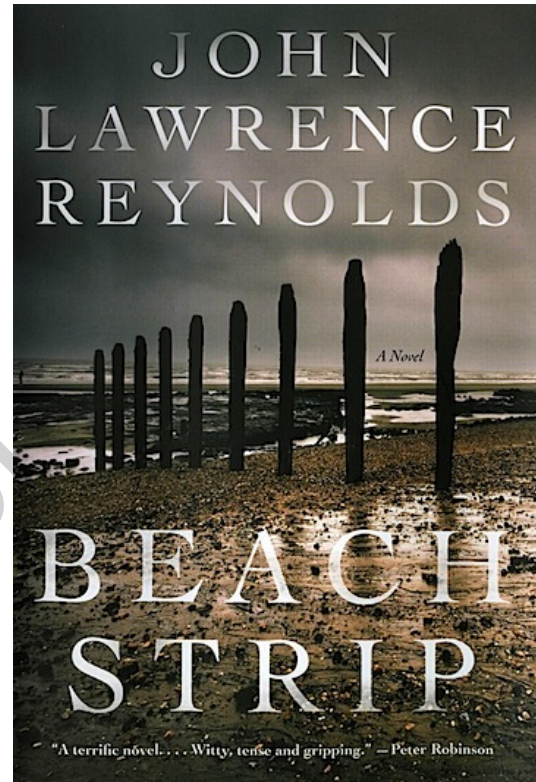
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

ALTHOUGH THERE IS NO SHORTAGE of women authors whose protagonists are male, the reverse is less often true. The Scottish crime writer Ian Rankin once told me that it was difficult for male writers to write convincingly from a woman's perspective. We discussed why that was, and agreed, somewhat disturbingly, that in many cases men simply aren't as perceptive as women. We moved on from that dark thought, and let the issue drop.

But it looks as though in at least one case we were wrong. After almost a ten-year hiatus from writing crime fiction, Canadian novelist John Lawrence Reynolds has turned out a new novel, and it's a winner. It features a woman as protagonist—and it's told from a first-person point of view. For good measure it contains not one, but two finely-etched portraits of sisters, very different women, each convincingly done.

Gabe Marshall is a police detective, and after he and Josie have each put failed marriages behind them, they are trying to carve out a



measure of happiness in a modest beach cottage on the shore of Lake Ontario that serves as their refuge from a troubled world. Or were, until one horrible evening when Josie returns home to find officers swarming over the site, marking off a grassy section of the beach with yellow tape, and inside that Stygian landscape, Gabe Marshall lying among the grass with a bullet in his brain.

GABE'S DEATH SEEMS clearly a suicide, and Josie's immediate thought is that somehow he discovered that she was having an affair with one of his fellow officers. When her sister descends on Josie from Vancouver to give her support, she notices an expensive ring that Gabe had recently given Josie. It's way beyond what a policeman can plausibly afford. Josie is evasive, uncertain how Gabe had acquired it. Unspoken between them is the question, had Gabe been on the take, and was the ring somehow implicated in his death?

DESPITE QUESTIONS from the investigating officers, and a media scrum that lays waste to her privacy, somehow Josie makes it through the next few days. When the bullet that killed Gabe is traced to his own gun, and paraffin tests reveal that he had fired the weapon, Josie still denies that it was suicide.

Refusing a departmental ceremony, she has Gabe's remains cremated, and takes his ashes past a nearby drawbridge to the canal to return them to the natural environment they both loved. She hears a man's voice telling her he knows what happened, but the draw-bridge horn sounds, warning that the bridge is about to be raised, almost knocking her over with its force, and causing her to

drop the box that had contained Gabe's remains. When she regains her senses the man is nowhere to be found. She runs home to regain her bearings, and only later returns to recover the box. She finds more than she expects: the remains of a man at the foot of the canal, his head crushed by the bridge's massive concrete counter-weight. Was it a macabre accident, or did he really have something to tell Josie about her husband's death?

Before her quest is over Josie will fight a department that has made up its mind about Gabe's death, and be forced to enter the shadowy world of his work. While getting to the bottom of things she will grapple with a druggie that shows up at her front door and a prowler in her back yard, and she will confront a local crime boss who is either her worst enemy or a valued friend. And in the process Josie will learn that betrayal takes many forms, sometimes that of someone who is closest to us.

REYNOLDS IS A SEASONED PROFESSIONAL, and it shows. A former president of the Crime Writers of Canada and two-time winner of the Arthur Ellis Award for Best Novel, he has half a dozen crime novels under his belt. *Beach Strip* is an engrossing read, with a strong sense of place and characters that are both believable and engaging.

Nicely paced, with several twists and a storyline that will hold the reader's attention, it marks the welcome return of an accom-

plished writer to Canadian crime fiction. Let's hope there are many more such tales in the offing.

First published on October 23, 2012, on *January Magazine*.

Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and latterly on such websites as *Spinetingler*, *The Rap Sheet*, *Shots Magazine*, *Crime Time*, *Reviewing The Evidence*, *January magazine*, and *Type M for Murder*, as well as on his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com

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